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Summary record of the 35th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 8 March 2005, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. MacKay ..... (New Zealand)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Kuznetsov

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 108: Programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 (*continued*)

Information and communication technology strategy (A/59/265 and A/59/558)

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Construction of additional office facilities at the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa (*continued*) (A/59/444 and A/59/572)

1. **Mr. Blinder** (Director of the Information Technology Services Division in the Office of Central Support Services), introducing the Secretary-General's report on information and communications technology strategy (A/59/265), said that an addendum to the report addressing possible steps for the maintenance and further enhancement of the Galaxy system was being finalized and would be taken up by the Committee in due course.

2. During the current biennium, priority attention had been given to the development of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and the report provided detailed information about major improvements in that regard. For instance, the Information Technology Services Division and the Communications and Information Technology Service of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations had decided to consolidate a number of key operational activities to ensure better coverage of 24x7 operations and reduce overall support costs.

3. A number of strategic security issues had been addressed during the reporting period and information security risk assessments had been completed for all offices away from Headquarters. The assessments had been conducted on the basis of industry standard methodologies and tools and had given rise to a series of recommendations designed to mitigate risk. At the policy level, the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2004/15, entitled "Use of information and communication technology resources and data", which addressed the appropriate use of those resources, had been issued. Considerable efforts had also been deployed to deal with an unprecedented onslaught of virus and spam attacks.

4. Significant progress had been made in the area of connectivity. Working in collaboration with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Division had taken measures to improve satellite connectivity with the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the International Tribunal for Rwanda and the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Offices were able to route their traffic through the earth station in Brindisi and could benefit from cheaper voice communication rates provided by Italian carriers. Furthermore, the subregional offices of ECA were now connected to Addis Ababa by means of new satellite links.

5. In terms of capacity-building, the global application of standard methodologies for the development of systems was already yielding results. The preparation of High-level Business Cases to justify such initiatives and to project their overall benefits and costs was an invaluable exercise that allowed the Organization to manage its resources more effectively and avoid waste. In that connection, the e-Assets database enabled offices to check whether similar systems or initiatives were already available, thereby avoiding duplication of efforts. Seminars had been held worldwide to ensure that the relevant actors were properly trained.

6. The establishment of the Project Review Committee had strengthened ICT governance, since all significant ICT initiatives must now be approved by the Committee prior to their implementation. To ensure the consistent application of standards, the budget instructions for the preparation of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007

included a requirement for a review by the Committee of all proposals prior to their submission.

7. As the lead agency in the United Nations system, the Information Technology Services Division had played a central role in the implementation of the United Nations system Extranet, which provided a platform for enhanced information-sharing among all 27 members of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) and other related organs. The Division had also taken part in a working group responsible for developing a comprehensive ICT strategy for the United Nations system. That strategy had been endorsed by the High-level Committee on Programmes, the High-level Committee on Management and CEB and would shortly be submitted to the General Assembly.

8. The Organization as a whole was highly dependent on information technology and was using that technology to reform and transform itself. The encouraging accomplishments described in the report were making it possible to use ICT resources in a more effective and efficient manner and more concrete examples of progress made in that area would be provided in the context of the proposed programme budget for the forthcoming biennium.

9. **Mr. Childerley** (Chief of the Oversight Support Unit in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Management), introducing the Secretary-General's report on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/59/523), said that the report covered the two-year period ending 30 June 2004 and provided detailed information on the exceptions authorized by the Secretary-General to the standards of accommodation normally applicable under the Organization's regulations and rules. Since the issuance of the report, the Department of Management had set up a database to record the details of each exception requested. That database included the additional information requested by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) in paragraph 5 of its report (A/59/573) and would allow for the speedier preparation of annexes to future reports and facilitate complete and accurate reporting.

10. A review of the guidelines governing exceptions to standards of accommodation had been initiated by the Administration, with a view to tightening the use of definitions in order to facilitate their consistent application. The review would also identify possible ways of reducing the number of exceptions granted, particularly in the case of first-class travel, and simplify the procedures involved in that aspect of the administration of travel. The Secretariat would continue to closely monitor exceptions in order to minimize additional costs to the Organization.

11. **Mr. Dossal** (Executive Director of the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships), introducing the Secretary-General's report on the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (A/59/170), said that the report, which summarized the Fund's activities for 2003, illustrated how the partnership between the United Nations and the United Nations Foundation had evolved over the years. The Fund was continuing to develop new relationships with the private sector and foundations and was increasingly regarded as a "one-stop-shop" for partnership-building. In particular, it offered a facilitation and advisory service to companies and foundations interested in entering into partnerships with United Nations entities and, by the end of December 2004, had fielded over 300 inquiries from organizations and individuals looking to provide human and financial resources, expertise and equipment. It had built its own internal advisory capacity and promoted a management approach based on the principle of "learning-by-doing".

12. The report described the programmatic aspects of the Fund's work and the efforts that had been made to bring programming frameworks further into alignment with the Millennium Development Goals. Regrettably, much of the information provided in the report had been superseded by the events of 2004, as at the end of that year, over $630 million had been allocated to more than 320 projects.

13. Successful partnerships were built on good relationships, rapid response time and effective management of expectations. An example of such a partnership was the polio eradication initiative, which had been carried out in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. In addition, following the Asian tsunami in December 2004, the Fund had attracted a total of $15 million to help strengthen the field presence of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

14. **Mr. Kuznetsov** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) introduced the related reports of the

Advisory Committee. Referring to the report of ACABQ on the review of the structure and functions of all liaison offices or representation in New York of organizations headquartered elsewhere funded from the regular budget (A/59/552), he said that the Advisory Committee recommended that the General Assembly should take note of the report of the Secretary-General. It intended to revert to the issue and examine the functions and level of staff resources of the liaison offices in New York in the context of its examination of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007, at which point it would expand upon the comments contained in the first chapter of its extensive report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005.

15. Introducing the report of ACABQ on the construction of additional office facilities at ECA in Addis Ababa (A/59/572), he cautioned that the new building must provide maximum office space so as to enable the Commission to carry out its regional functions. Provision for additional meeting rooms should therefore be made only after the office space requirements for ECA staff had been met. Prior understandings should also be reached with the various United Nations agencies, funds, programmes and other entities in order to allow priority-oriented planning and to ensure the most efficient use of space. Information on such understandings should be included in the next report of the Secretary-General. The Advisory Committee recommended that the General Assembly should take note of the Secretary-General's report.

16. With regard to information and communications technology strategy (A/59/558), the Advisory Committee recommended that the General Assembly should take note of the Secretary-General's progress report on implementing the ICT strategy (A/59/265) and his report on the United Nations website (A/59/336).

17. Introducing the Advisory Committee's report on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/59/573), he noted that the number of exceptions granted and the related costs had increased significantly as compared to those reported for the previous period. He reiterated the Advisory Committee's request that exceptions for first- and business-class travel should be backed up by the additional information listed in paragraph 5 of the report and noted with satisfaction that the Secretariat had already taken steps to address that request.

18. In strict conformity with existing procedures, travel should always be by the most direct and economical route and itineraries should not be manipulated to provide for a higher standard of accommodation than would otherwise be allowed. Due to recent developments in air travel, namely the elimination by many airlines of first-class sections and the creation of several varieties of enhanced business-travel, the time had come to reconsider the whole question of first-class travel. The General Assembly might wish to give further guidance on such travel, which should be used only in the most exceptional circumstances.

19. **Mr. Van Den Bossche** (Belgium), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the acceding countries (Bulgaria and Romania), the stabilization and association process countries (Serbia and Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and, in addition, Iceland and Liechtenstein and referring to the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries (A/59/373), said that, while the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and the Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG Library) had introduced advanced technologies, other libraries were lagging behind in that area, which had impeded an accurate assessment of library staffing requirements across the United Nations system. The European Union supported the development of a new library policy and took the view that the recommendations of OIOS should form the basis of the General Assembly's work at the current part of its resumed session.

20. The European Union took note of the Secretary-General's review of the structure and functions of liaison offices (A/59/395) and of the Secretariat's statement that the liaison offices provided substantive contributions to the work programmes of their parent offices. It also took note of the Advisory Committee's intention to revert to the issue in the broader context of its examination of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007.

21. The Union welcomed the Secretariat's efforts to develop a modern ICT structure designed to ensure improved human resources management and better interaction between the Secretariat and the funds and programmes. It agreed with the Advisory Committee that the ICT strategy must allow for further integration, standardization and unification of infrastructures and

processes throughout the United Nations system and expressed disappointment that only modest efforts had been made to reduce the huge digital divide between the Secretariat's strategy and those of the specialized agencies. He welcomed the fact that savings of approximately $33 million had been identified but asked whether there was a clear distinction between the costs under the second "building block" (security policies and provisions to ensure business continuity) and the future costs of data protection, mirror servers and other back-up devices necessary for enhanced safety and security.

22. The European Union was disappointed at the lack of progress made in the construction of additional office facilities at ECA. It nevertheless supported the Advisory Committee's recommendation on making maximum use of the building for the purpose for which it had been initially intended and would be grateful for clarification as to how requests for office space from other United Nations entities could be accommodated.

23. With reference to the Secretary-General's report on standards of accommodation for air travel (A/59/523), he was concerned that the number of exceptions continued to increase in spite of efforts to curtail them. Definitions needed to be tightened and applied more consistently and the Chairman of the Advisory Committee should provide more information about the proposal to limit the future use of first-class travel.

24. With reference to the Secretary-General's report on the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (A/59/170), he was pleased to learn that the Fund's mandate was to promote high-impact projects in the areas of, inter alia, children's health and peace, security and human rights. The Fund was a working example of a public-private partnership and highlighted the value of corporate social responsibility.

25. **Ms. Taylor Roberts** (Jamaica), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and referring to the report of OIOS on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries (A/59/373), stressed that any changes in the United Nations policy on libraries should be introduced in consultation with Member States and that the libraries of the United Nations specialized agencies should be invited to participate in the Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries. While automation could help to improve the delivery of library services, attention should be paid to increasing the number of documents available in electronic format in all official languages. There was also a need for harmonization and collaboration on the use of technology and the Internet in all United Nations libraries.

26. The Group of 77 and China had taken note of the Secretary-General's report on the construction of additional office facilities at ECA and hoped that the Commission would make every effort to meet the targets set in the revised project schedule and to keep the project costs within the approved budget. In that connection, it would be grateful for an update on the financial impact of security-related enhancements to the building design. The Group wished to express its appreciation to the Government of Ethiopia for the allocation of additional land to ECA and for the re-routing of public roads to ensure that the land fell within the compound's security boundaries.

27. Lastly, the Group welcomed the report of OIOS on the audit of safeguarding air safety standards while procuring air services for the United Nations peacekeeping missions (A/59/347). While every effort must be made to ensure that aircraft services were procured on the best terms available, there could be no compromise on safety and the pertinent recommendations contained in the report should therefore be implemented without delay.

28. **Mr. Getachew** (Ethiopia) said that the Ethiopian Government had demonstrated its commitment to the construction of additional office facilities at ECA by, inter alia, providing additional land, re-routing a major road and closing adjacent parking lots. Both the Government and the Addis Ababa Tour Planning Authority stood ready to cooperate with ECA in all areas.

29. **Ms. Lock** (South Africa) said that South Africa had supported the General Assembly's decision to construct additional office facilities at ECA and therefore welcomed the Secretary-General's progress report. She hoped that ECA would be able to implement the revised project schedule and complete the construction phase by April 2007 and that, once built, the new facilities would address the acute need for office space and enable the Commission to accommodate the United Nations organizations that were currently located outside the compound.

30. Her delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's report on the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships and commended the Fund's activities. Partnerships with non-State actors played an increasingly important role in the work of the Organization and recent United Nations conferences had lent further impetus to the growth of both project partnerships on the ground and strategic global partnerships. To that end, the activities of the Fund continued to play an important role in the implementation of the commitments made at the major United Nations conferences and summits, in particular the Millennium Development Goals and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

31. The Secretary-General's report on liaison offices (A/59/395) clearly illustrated that such offices performed an important representational role and made a valuable substantive contribution to the mandate of their parent offices. They also provided Member States and Secretariat structures with a useful link to their parent offices, which could not be replaced through the use of information technology. Since the various liaison offices each performed distinct substantive activities, her delegation was not convinced of the merits of any proposal to consolidate their services. In that connection, it might be opportune to consider whether or not the consolidation of the liaison offices of the five regional commissions into one single office had been to the benefit of the individual commissions and, bearing in mind the additional mandates assigned to those commissions by Member States since the creation of that office, to assess whether the consolidation had strengthened the substantive work performed by them.

32. In its consideration of the functions and level of the staff resources of the liaison offices in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007, the Advisory Committee should consider ways to strengthen the offices, bearing in mind their different substantive roles. The General Assembly should also consider ways of strengthening certain sections of the regular budget that were currently funded largely from extrabudgetary resources.

33. **Mr. Yoo** Dae-Jong (Republic of Korea) welcomed the reduction in support costs and the $33.3 million in savings achieved by the Organization's information and communication technology strategy and looked forward to details of the return on investment. It also welcomed free public access to the Official Document System of the United Nations (ODS) as a significant step forward in making the Organization more transparent.

34. His delegation recalled that the Board of Auditors had called for more proactive coordination of information and communication technology activities in the Secretariat, funds and programmes and for the full exploitation of the potential synergies that existed across the United Nations system. While it agreed that the Galaxy-R2 system would speed up the selection of candidates to fill vacancies, a staff selection system based on quantitative factors ran the risk of judging candidates by their backgrounds rather than their demonstrated capabilities, integrity and devotion. His delegation would therefore like an initial evaluation of the operation and effectiveness of the prototype vacancy matching system.

35. **Mr. Garcia** (United States of America) said that first-class air travel should be used only in exceptional cases in order to make rational use of the Organization's resources.

36. **Mr. Iosifov** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation agreed with the recommendations contained in the OIOS report on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries (A/59/373) and fully supported the role of the Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries in recommending measures to improve the efficiency of, and access to, United Nations libraries. It welcomed the Steering Committee's success in reorganizing and coordinating the activities of the libraries. The Committee must be given appropriate funding so that a new library policy could be developed and put to the General Assembly for approval and possible incorporation into a draft resolution.

37. **Mr. Elji** (Syrian Arab Republic) asked when the OIOS report on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries would be passed to the Committee on Information, which must have the opportunity to consider the general policy recommendations of OIOS. With regard to standards of accommodation for air travel, he expressed concern at escalating costs and agreed with the recommendations contained in the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/59/573). With reference to the report of the Secretary-General on liaison offices (A/59/395), he welcomed the support for the staff representing the

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, but wondered why other important organizations did not have the same level of assistance, thereby forcing them to incur high travel costs. His delegation supported the recommendations in the related report of the Advisory Committee (A/59/552).

38. With reference to the report of the Secretary-General on information and communications technology (A/59/265), care must be taken to ensure that the Organization's information and communication technology infrastructure was user-friendly and supported all the official languages. The use of such technology must not be seen as an aim in itself, but as a way of spreading knowledge of the Organization's legislative mandates. Its cost-effectiveness must be carefully evaluated.

39. He wondered whether Internet protocol, which was not developed enough to provide goods results, was being used for videoconferencing and what steps were being taken to provide members of delegations and visitors with easy Internet access, particularly in conference rooms. He welcomed the introduction of free public access to ODS and would like more information on disaster recovery and business continuity measures. With regard to evaluating the return on investment in information and communication technology, both quantitative and qualitative assessments were needed.

40. Development of Galaxy must be examined in the light of the most recent General Assembly resolutions on human resources management and he would welcome more information on the potential for the system to automatically assign candidates to current vacancies.

41. With reference to the list of major information and communication technology projects contained in the annex to the report of the Secretary-General (A/59/265), he wondered why two vital Department of Political Affairs projects, the first relating to the conversion of the Electoral Assistance Division filing system and the second to a geographical information system (GIS) of the Occupied Palestinian Territory, were on hold because of a lack of staff and/or resources.

42. **Mr. Berti Oliva** (Cuba) said that his delegation supported the Advisory Committee's view that the time had come for a reconsideration of the whole question of first-class air travel and requested further information on the Advisory Committee's observation that many airlines were introducing different varieties of enhanced business-class travel. There should also be a strict definition of entitlement criteria and their consistent application.

43. He supported the recommendations contained in the Advisory Committee's report on information and communications technology strategy (A/59/558) and the comments of the South African representative on liaison offices in New York. The Advisory Committee should take account of the representational role of such offices when considering the cost of maintaining them. He commended the Ethiopian Government on its support for the construction of additional office facilities at ECA and hoped that the project schedule would be respected. Lastly, he would welcome clarification of how OIOS had reached the conclusion that library staff lacked motivation, mobility and career prospects and wondered how such problems were being addressed.

44. **Mr. Renault** (Brazil), supported by **Ms. Samayoa-Recari** (Guatemala) thanked the Ethiopian Government for supporting the construction of additional office facilities at ECA and endorsed the statement made by the representative of South Africa on that subject.

45. **Mr. Blinder** (Director of the Information Technology Services Division in the Office of Central Support Services), responding to the comments made by the representative of Belgium, speaking on behalf of the European Union, said it was unfortunate that the Committee had been unable to take up the report of the Secretary-General (A/59/265) during the main part of the Assembly's fifty-ninth session, as it was now six months out of date. Further progress had since been made in redressing the digital divide between the Secretariat and agencies. The information and communication technology focal points had all approved a strategy to be put to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session. Consultations on disaster recovery and business continuity had been held in December 2004, and a report would be ready for consideration at the Assembly's sixtieth session. The representative of the Republic of Korea had asked about the Galaxy system, which was due to be reviewed and enhanced. An addendum to the report, which was being prepared for consideration by the General Assembly, would provide further details.

46. The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic had rightly pointed out the disadvantage of using Internet protocols for videoconferencing. For that reason, the Organization continued to use the more reliable Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) protocol. Wireless connectivity for the benefit of delegations and visitors had been expanding and the room which the Committee was currently occupying had acquired that facility in the previous three months. He would contact the information and communication technology focal point in the Department of Political Affairs in order to find out why the two projects mentioned had been put on hold and would supply an answer in writing.

47. **Ms. Azarias** (Director of the Internal Audit Division I in the Office of Internal Oversight Services), responding to the question of the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, said that the report of OIOS on the review of the operations and management of United Nations libraries (A/59/373) would be passed to the Committee on Information the following week. In reply to the question of the representative of Cuba regarding the motivation of library staff, OIOS had reached its conclusions after detailed interviews with library staff at all levels in New York and Geneva. She would supply further information if the representative of Cuba so desired.

48. **Mr. Kuznetsov** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), responding to comments on the Advisory Committee's recommendations regarding standards of accommodation for air travel (A/59/573), said that, in consultations with representatives of the Secretary-General, he had been left with the impression that the criteria used for first-class air travel were very broad, encompassing former heads of State and prominent international figures in the political, humanitarian or cultural arenas, and that exceptions were also made for personal aides and security officers. The Advisory Committee had also noticed that some airlines had eliminated their first-class cabins and had developed several varieties of enhanced business-class, while others had retained limited first-class seating and still offered enhanced business-class travel. Those two considerations had led the Advisory Committee to recommend a review of the policy and to invite the General Assembly to provide further guidance on the future use of first-class travel.

49. Turning to the question of the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic regarding the use of the Galaxy system to automatically assign candidates to vacancies, he said that the Office of Human Resources Management was better placed to provide details.

50. **Mr. Elji** (Syrian Arab Republic) asked for his request for details of the vacancy-matching system to be passed to the Office of Human Resources Management. He wondered whether its use was an exception to the rules adopted by the General Assembly. He looked forward to receiving in writing the reasons for the suspension of the two Department of Political Affairs information and communication technology projects he had mentioned.

51. **The Chairman** said he took it that the Committee, having considered the report of the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships, wished to adopt the following draft decision: "The General Assembly takes note of the report of the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (A/59/170)".

52. *It was so decided.*

The meeting rose at 11.30 a.m.